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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a conceptual framework for identifying high-stress, negative community college work environments and offers suggestions for managers who are willing to make the changes necessary to turn a stress-laden environment into a positive, more productive one. The paper begins with a discussion of workplace stress and the conditions, such as negativism, achievement orientation, tension, leadership styles, and morale, which are related to stress. The paper then describes a survey of randomly selected employees from two community colleges which sought to determine levels of stress in the colleges and relate these levels to the management styles in use at the schools. Next, several models and techniques are described as means of initiating environmental changes. These include the Carkhuff Model, which uses leader/individual dialogues focusing on empathizing, self-exploration, understanding, commitment, and action; the T Group Approach, which helps individuals learn from their behavior and group interactions while working to create a productive and viable organization; and the TORI (Trust, Openness, Realization, and Interdependence) model of styled leadership. Finally, an eight-part model for identifying and reducing stress is outlined, which involves a stress survey, faculty/administrator dialogue, a concern box, allotment of time for individual appointments, periodic retreats, staff development, extra-curricular activities, and ongoing stress management. (HB)

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A NEW DIMENSION: THE LEADER'S ROLE IN IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING STRESS IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Presented to

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by

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A DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTICLE

The proceeding article will present a conceptual framework for identifying a high stress, negative work environment and an eclectic model for change. With the understanding that people react differently to stimuli in their environments for a number of reasons, the writer will proceed to describe a variety of possible causes for stressful, negative behavior on a job. Several techniques are used for the purpose of measuring the impact of such an environment and its possible effect on the individual employee, his/her colleagues and the institution. Based on a review of literature an assumption is made that a high-stress, negative work environment is counter productive, or at best it decreases the efficacy level, of an organization or insitution and that stress management could increase productivity and create a high morale atmosphere in the work environment.

A summary of the "stress identification" data reveals employees' reactions to their environments from a sample study. This is followed by a discussion of desired individual behavior, group behavior and work environment. The article concludes with a model presenting several suggestions for managers who are willing to "take the bull by the horns" and change the negative stress laden work environment to a positive more productive one.

David E. Hartl, in his article "Stress and the Agent of Change" states:

> . . . stress can produce harmful or painful symtoms. And, all of us have personal limits of stress toleration which, when exceeded, can cause major breakdowns in physical and psychological health. This is what we mean by distress, or more pointedly, by disease.[1]

It is apparent that there is considerable agreement with that statement because one can observe countless books on the market written to assist people in "handling or dealing with" stress. Stress management and positive thinking classes are offered on many college campuses. Some organizations are sponsoring "anti-stress" workshops to guard against the "Yes sir, no sir," ulcer syndrome some psychologists describe as commonplace in today's work world. A stress-laden work environment could lead to significant waste of time and emotional energy. Time and energy that most leaders would agree, should be channeled into increased productivity and maintenance of harmony in an organization.

One might argue that a certain level of stress is the basis for achievement orientation, stress acting as a motivator to success. Still others view stress, in moderation, as essential to our existence, without which the alternative is death, non-existence. Dr. Alan Hedman, who wrote "Stress Can Kill You," condones a certain (untold) amount of stress as a natural, healthy part of our lives. He states, however, "People tend to ignore damaging types of stress that can kill."[2]

The seemingly positive goal of achievement (which is usually accompanied by moderate stress which some psychologists believe healthy) has a negative impact on the individual and the work environment. A highly competitive environment may produce similar results. Particularly in situations where "cut-backs" are threatened.

Some of the most talented individuals in many fields, particularly in education, are not as effective as they could be due to stressful work environments. Most managers agree a stressful work environment often results in wasted time and energy, both emotional and physical. Time and energy are important commodities to direct in the sucess of most organizations.

There are numerous factors that might be attributed to excessive stress in the work environment. Negativism, which could very well be though of as a "close relative" to stress, is one area which should be explored. Negativism and/or high levels of stress may have no immediate identifiable origin or it could obviously be generated by a particular management style. Perhaps the result of real or imagined external pressures unrelated to the job, i.e., marital or interpersonal relationship problems, economic conditions (inflation). A lack of job security (possible cut-backs), pressures to "produce" in an unreasonable time-frame are a common phenomena in today's "work world."

The mood is more readily recognized than the causes. All too often one hears, in elevators and hallways of large and small institutions, the following types of comments: "Thank God,

it's Friday!"; "I don't like this or that, him or her. . ."; or "I cannot possibly complete this amount of work in the time allowed, he (she) is unfair/unreasonable."

The comments often reek with dissatisfaction, discord, disgust, and in many instances of overheard conversations, one might detect more negative comments are being made than positive statements. This may be described as a negative work environment and is often accompanied by stress.

A difficult task is the determination of whether stress is causing negativism or vice-versa. When observing the dynamics of a negative work environment, one might think negativism is "contagious." What may actually be the case is Irwing James' "Group Think" syndrome.[3] Modifying his concept as it applied to decision-making in the work environment; In a "Group Think" situation, the members of the group adopts what is thought to be the consensus viewpoint. For instance, if the majority of the members of the group relates negatively to the job or work environment, most likely the rest will go along with that view of behavior. Under such conditions, the individual would be afraid to state, "I like my job (or administrator)" fearing peer disapproval or isolation from the group. The motive for negativism, then, is acceptance.

More often, people are unaware of their motives for and/or the causes of negativism. Thus, they may not fully perceive the impact of their negative behavior on others or their productivity on the job. Any one or several of the previously

mentioned external pressures may cause negative "projections" in the work environment--personality notwithstanding. A popular belief is that the individual imposes stress on him/herself by over reacting to certain stimuli at home and/or on the job.

To this point I have been exploring the possible causes of stress unrelated to, but impacting, the work environment. Although achievement orientation is personal, stress producers related to such orientation may be "manufactured" on the job. According to Hartl:

> Because most organizations often lack awareness of personal stress limits many individuals, trying hard to excel in organizations, find themselves experiencing chronic symtoms of distress. This factor is of major significance because it is clear that too much stress is not only physically and psychologically harmful, it is also counter-productive and uneconomical. Still, stress-producing situations continue to be fostered. Many organizational leaders unwittingly subscribe to "carrot and stick" philosophies of motivation without properly understanding the full ramifications of their actions.[4]

The competitive environment may be severe enough to cause individuals to experience high levels of stress, which are counter productive. Often excessive stress is associated with leadership stifles/power structures and/or company politics.

Sheridan and Vredenburgh's study of tension, performance and termination of nurses eluded to the latter.

> Leader [leadership behavior styles] consideration was inversely associated with tension and terminations, but also with job performance . . . Reward and expert power were useful in predicting job tension.[5]

Rosenbaum defends the leadership "type" in part as he refers to Anderson's research in his article which concludes that:

> The evidence available fails to demonstrate either authoritarian or democratic leadership is consistently associated with higher productivity. In most situations, however, democratic leadership is associated with higher morale.[6]

It should be noted that high morale should not be in lieu of efficiency and/or high productivity. However, high morale does suggest a positive work environment, which generally lends itself to increased productivity. To a large extent the mood and pace of the atmosphere generally originates from, or can be altered by management. Regardless of the style of management, the observed emotional state of employees and the productivity of the institution should be indicators of successful management. This task opens a whole new field for managers and raises the initial question: How does a manager identify stress and it's producers?

This challenges management to identify the source of stress, even if the process requires introspection or a careful evaluation of the management style. If high levels of stress can be identified (through the observation of behavior) in only a small percentage of employees, the leader would focus his/her "helping" attention on those individuals, using some of the techniques which will be mentioned later in this article. However, if the work environment and the employee behavior is generally all encompassing negative and stressful, exploration into leadership style or working conditions for possible causes becomes imperative.

This writer assumed the task of identifying stress

in order to suggest feasible stress identifying techniques to the reader(s). Several methods and institutions were used in this study. Interviews, a stress survey and observations were conducted at two institutions. Since the primary purpose of this paper is to create a model for identifying and alleviating stress in the community college work environment, the subjects for this study included randomly selected employees from two basically different (demographically) community colleges. A stress "burn-out" survey, developed by Nurses Christian Fellowship '79 was used (see appendix).

Most saw the survey as a great opportunity to ventilate, to document their negative feeling and frustrations. Others simply agreed to do the survey. The survey was designed to measure the level of stress. A person scoring a high of 150-120 was in a high stress environment; 120-100 a medium stress environment and under 100 low stress. The survey consisted of 30 words to respond to (15 negative and 15 positive) reaction ranging from almost never to almost always on a scale from five to one for negative words and one to five for the positive words.

A summary of the survey results indicated that the stress level appeared to be highest at College A, while College B seemed to have the least amount of stress. Of the fifteen negative words, "frustration" received the highest mean average of responses.

The interviews were conducted in an attempt to detect sincerity, playfulness and/or how adamantly the workers were in their responses to questions regarding their work environment.

In many cases (particularly at College A) the response to the question: "How do you feel about your work environment" was negative and workers had targets for their dissatisfaction. At College B the relative calm or contentment was attributed to the support and buffering done by a division chairperson while certain hostilities were directed at the general management. At College A the overall dissatisfaction was not buffered (rather encouraged) by middle-management.

Using the "Management Grid,"[7] based upon the theory of relationship vs. task oriented management styles, I attempted to identify the types of management at the various institutions. The object was to determine whether or not the style of leadership impacted the level of stress. At College A the employees responded to both types of leadership in basically the same manner, high stress for different reasons. At College B, where the division chairperson appeared relationship-oriented the stress level was considerably lower than the response to the apparently task-oriented upper-level management.

In situations where managers find the stress level high enough to take action or choose to take precautions to prevent stress level increases, models for change are useful. The following models and techniques are offered to assist leaders in the process of initiating change from excessively stressful environment to a low stress environment.

I begin with the use of the "Stress Identification and Reduction Framework." Initially the goals for Good Mental

Health should be advocated in the work environment. The leader should emphasize the need to feel comfortable with one's self, feel good about other people and be able to meet the demands involved in living.

The Carkhuff Model (modified by Gazda), a process involving leader/individual dialogue, could be used by the leader to help individuals identify their own stress producers while working toward "good mental health." The Carkhuff Model of "helping" focuses on empathizing, self-exploration, understanding, commitment and action. The process is designed to assist the individual in identifying and acting on the problem. The major emphasis is placed on empathy.[8]

In situations where the identifiable causes of stress are related to organizational changes, there are numerous techniques a leader might use to minimize stress. Among them are the T Group described by Bradford as:

> a relatively unstructured group in which individuals participate as learners. The data for learning are not outside these individuals or removed from their immediate experience within the T Group. The data are the transactions among the members, their own behavior in the group, as they struggle to create a productive and viable organization, a miniature society, as they work to stimulate and support one another's learning within that society.[9]

The T Group provides opportunity for problems to surface and be dealt with openly. The T Group Approach, accompanied by the TORI styled leadership, could bring stability to the group. Gibbs explains the TORI (Trust, Openness, Realization and Interdependence) model of styled leadership as one that could be helpful to the administrators in creating an atmosphere for change.

He states:

> TORI theory implies a theory of learning that says: Growth occurs when a person on his own steam, on his own impetus does things that reinforce desired physical response and behavior patterns.[10]

He further describes TORI in the following way: Trust--movement from depersonalization and role toward greater personalization; Openness--from closed system toward more open system; Realization--from impositional motivation toward greater self-determination; Interdependence--from dependency toward greater interdependency.

In an atmosphere where much uncertainty is felt regarding job security and/or organizational structural changes and/or breakdown in communications, the TORI model could be useful. The TORI leadership style is more "relationship oriented" than "task oriented." In a relationship oriented work environment the leader interacts more on a personal level (trust, respect, affection) with the employees, contrasted to the task oriented leader whose interactions are more goal (little participation in decision making) and deadline oriented.[11]

There is not a "hard fast rule" stating that stress cannot be reduced (or is ever present) in a task oriented work environment. Both leadership styles have proven to be effective depending upon the individual's personality. However, in a high-stress environment where the need for openness and reassurance is evidenced, eclecticism may be required. Thus, a task oriented leader "draws" from the TORI model and others to improve the

atmosphere and increase productivity.

In summary, the format for change, could be developed from the following framework:

FRAMEWORK TO REDUCE AND IDENTIFY STRESS:
FOR LEADERS AT THE COMMUNITY
COLLEGE LEVEL

1. Develop a stress survey tailored to meet your needs or use one of several which are available and effective. The main purpose is to determine the "level of stress" at your institution.

2. Have faculty/administration dialogue sessions which would include representatives from the classified employees.

   a. Provide ground rules which would eliminate the possibility of one or two outspoken persons monopolizing the group time with person gripes.

3. Make available and accessible, i.e. locate in mailroom or time reporting room, a "Concern Box." Administrators should review, categorize and respond to statements in the dialogue sessions.

   a. Make available a form that could be addressed to a particular manager (administrator).

4. Set aside time for appointments with individuals (perhaps one afternoon weekly--4 hours, allowing 30-40 minutes each appointment). Use the Carkhuff model.

5. Schedule one whole day or two half-day retreats annually (semi-annually) at which time T Groups could be formed and administrators could deliver short "State of the Union" addresses.

6. Staff development program which includes guest speakers on stress management could be developed

7. Encourage extra-curricular activities, staff bowling, intramural sports, use of P.E. facilities on lunch hour for an exercise program to relieve tensions.

Once the stress level is obviously reduced, the leader should continue to offer programs geared toward stress management (see appendix for chart).

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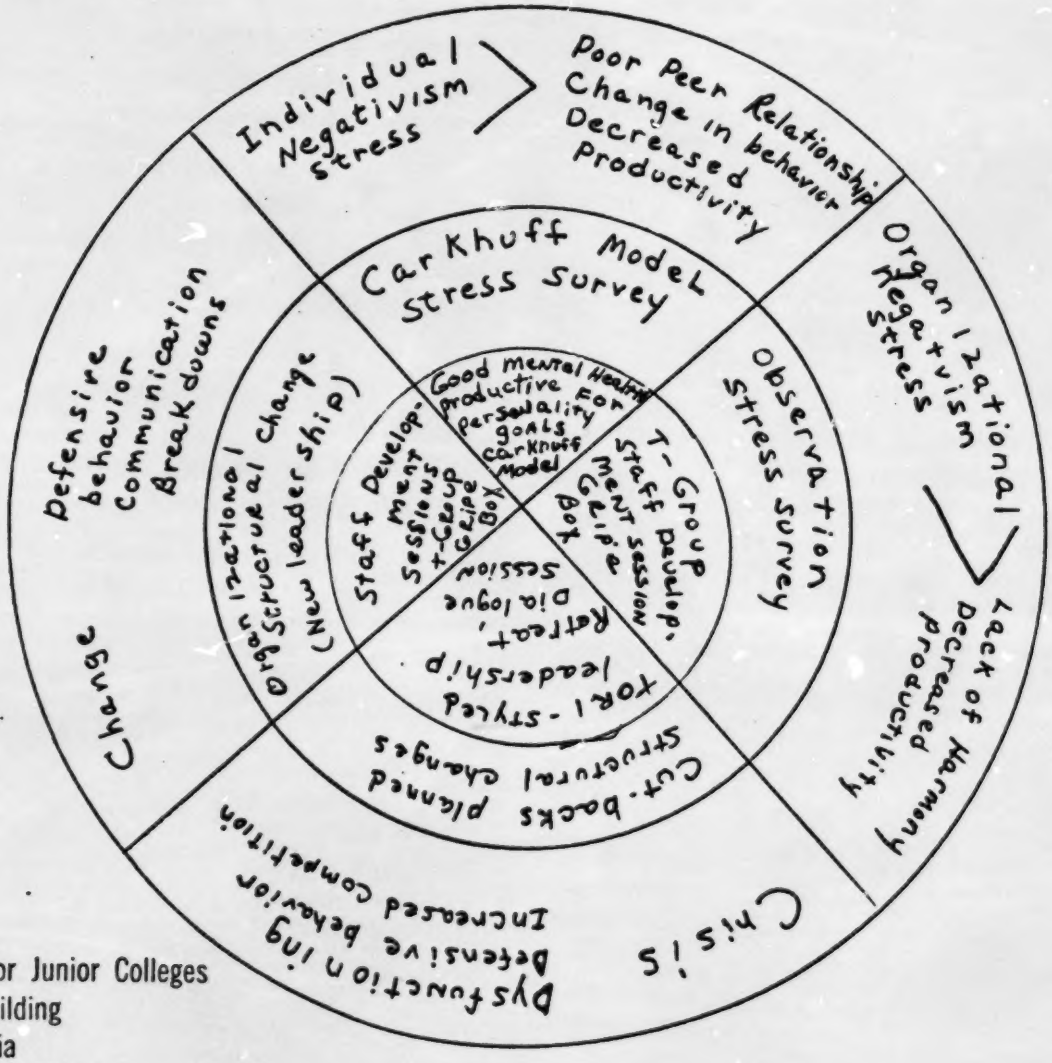
APPENDIX

STRESS IDENTIFICATION AND REDUCTION OF STRESS FRAMEWORK



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Note: One category may be the cause of another, therefore the solution may not be isolated to one area. Further, depending on the leadership style, the leader may use the models or techniques suitable for his/her style, by spinning the center circle.

Outer Circle - Problems and Symptoms
Middle Circle - Behavior Identifiers
Center Circle - Model/Technique for Change

Goal: Increased Productivity/Efficiency, Harmony, Stress Reduction, Stress Prevention.